Flamekeeper
a c!niki zine

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Mod Thank-You Note

The final release of a zine is a unique experience. Seeing everything you've worked on so hard for months, maybe even years, finally come together into a finished, polished result in the hands of strangers, is equal parts terrifying and exhilarating. After so long, all of that work has paid off.

Dear reader, thank you for taking the time to download this zine. It was a labor of love from all involved, contributor and mods alike, and certainly not without its roadbumps - but with its highlights and joys as well. It's thanks to the community of contributors, a shared enthusiasm for c!Niki, and a lot of time and effort that this zine is finally ready for your perusal.

And on that note, I'd like to take a moment to thank our contributors specifically, for their patience and hard work every step of the way. This zine would not exist without each and every one of you, and the mod team cannot express enough gratitude for it.

Read on, and we hope you enjoy the zine ahead!

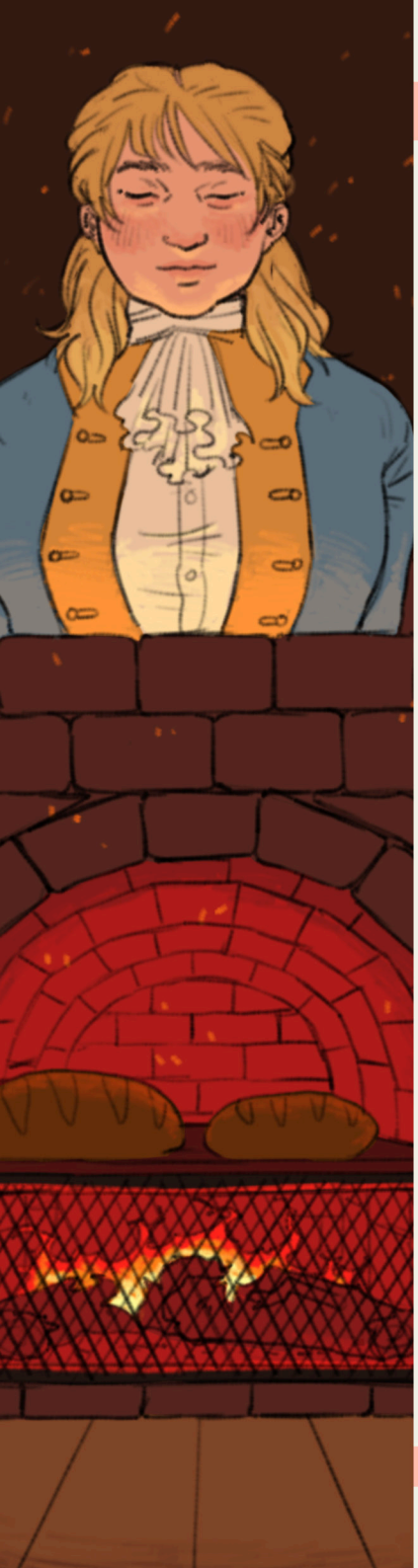
The Mods of Flamekeeper

MERCH GALLERY

< Phone Background
by Yeti

Emojis by TreesAreRedInAutumn

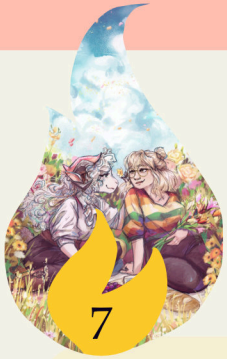
Background by salsascribbless



Hearth

The hearth is a heart of a home - the fire that provides warmth, safety, and food for her family. Though the hearth is a controlled blaze, she tends and is tended to with love and care by those around her.

This section will center warm flames aligned with the home and the hearth; fire is something that, when tamed gently and through love and care, creates warmth, home, and a safe place to sleep.



pass the sugar

chrysalizzm, p. 8

Scene: Niki, alone in the Camarvan.

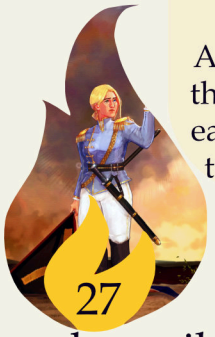
< TreesAreRedInAutumn

i love you (i want us both to eat well)

Antimony_Medusa, p. 9

As four injured people rebuild their lives, the Syndicate has started meeting to teach each other things. And this time it's Niki's turn to lead. She's going to make a cake.

AGameboi



salsascribbless

Bury the Embers

AJ (wonder_womans_ex), p. 19

Bandages and alcohol wipes; half a health potion; an almost-stale loaf of rye bread. Niki, giving and giving and giving.

zephr

Irons in the fire

Anarchy-schmanarchy , p. 29

"To have many irons in the fire" - to be involved with many activities or jobs at the same time.

Niki is keeping the revolution going. She has to. For Wilbur. For Pogtopia. But most of all - for the people of Manburg with no one else.

pidgedee

Pass the sugar

By Chrysalizzm

in the quiet you build a cake
old eggs the last of the sugar
wheat with the mold hacked off

the knife unfamiliar you used the last
to cut my hair short can't shoot
a rifle blind you see but the cake

is soft and white despite everything
the littlest of indulgences
in the heavy hot of the late summer

you slather it with frosting
icing my darling i'm sorry i forgot
there was a difference

i love you (i want us both to eat well)

By Antimony_medusa

The drop through lava and fall into ice water had gotten rid of most of the snow, but Niki still automatically stamped her boots free of ice before she tracked it into the syndicate meeting room. Philza was off to the side of the door, hanging his coat haphazardly on a wither skull. Ranboo anxiously adjusted his suit jacket after cramming long limbs into a boat for the ice road. Technoblade's footsteps rang on the stone behind her. "Where'd you want these?"

She glanced over her shoulder. The piglin brute was carrying a furnace, arms wrapped around the stone block. Philza looked up from where he was shaking snow out of his clogs. "That'll work over on that wall, won't it?" He looked to Niki for confirmation.

Niki glanced at the indicated space, a span between soul sand pillars and warped wood. She nodded. "That'll do."

She moved to the syndicate table and started unpacking her groceries. Butter, two types of sugar, some eggs. Flour, the vanilla extract she made herself in old potion bottles, a lemon she'd asked Ponk for. The syndicate had decided on a monthly meeting to meet up and learn about different subjects, and this time it was Niki's turn to teach.

She lined up her ingredients on the table, the strange humming energy it always put off thrumming through her fingertips. How was this going to go? She had been abandoned and left to burn so many times. She didn't want to storm away in the middle of baking, anger demanding that she destroy something, half-made ingredients left to harden inedibly as she went to break herself against stones or explosives. She didn't want to be alone again.

Techno shifted the furnace into place with a scrape of stone and then straightened to face her, brushing his palms on his pants. He was still wearing the cape, white fur and red velvet covering his shoulders. "Alright Niki, what're we making?" He grinned slightly, the corner of his mouth quirking up around his tusks. "If it's a wither, I already know how to make those."

"No withers," Niki told him. She smiled, because you have to smile, don't you, and because he was her friend. He wasn't going to throw this back in her teeth, she hoped. "We're making spice cake." She pointed. "And you'll probably want to take off any clothes you don't want flour on."

She tilted her head to the side slightly, holding her breath, but Techno nodded, hanging up his cape. Phil had brought an apron, and he approached the table with his hands behind his back as he tied the strings. He looked at her expectantly. Niki handed him the rhubarb. "Could you cut this into ribbons about the width of your pinkie nail, and we're going to line the bottom of the pan with them?" She brought out the cast iron pan she'd lugged across the server and measured sugar into it. "I'm going to start the topping, Ranboo, could you zest this lemon?"

Ranboo had his sleeves rolled up. He nodded, taking the grater and the lemon and getting to work. Niki took a steadying breath. She had this. This was going to go well. She checked the recipe, written out carefully on a card and stuck in with the spice jars. Last night she'd modified it to make it fit this group better, swapping ingredients and techniques. "Techno, could you measure out butter and sugar and beat them till they're fluffy?" She handed him a bowl. It was holding a wooden spoon, the recipe card, and a scale.

"Ah yes, hittin' somethin'," Techno said sagely. "I can do this." He put the bowl down on the table and held the recipe up to his nose, checking it anxiously.

"You make potions all the time," Niki told him. She nodded as confidently as she could. "Same thing."

Techno glanced down at her and smiled crookedly. "They seem a bit different to me," he denied, but he started measuring sugar, hand careful above the scale.

Niki smiled briefly at him and turned back to the bowl, reaching for a spoon. She needed to measure out spices and leavening. Several careful spoonfuls later, there was a crunch noise, and she turned with her eyebrows raised.

Phil had bitten into one of the stalks of rhubarb, and Ranboo was poised with a stick above his mouth.

Had they not paid attention to what she asked them to do? Niki folded her arms protectively across her chest. "Oh?"

"Ah, we shouldn't have done that, you're right.' Ranboo said, putting the rhubarb down hastily. "You're so right."

Phil swallowed his bite and grinned at her. "Got it all cut, just eatin' the leftovers." He gestured to a line of rhubarb strips laid out on the table. The avian tipped his head to the side, eyebrows questioning. "That okay? I haven't had rhubarb for a long time, I was just showin' Ranboo how."

She'd chosen the fruit specifically because she'd heard Phil talk about a rhubarb cake he'd eaten in his childhood, laughingly nostalgic and sure that it was out of reach. It looked like he'd dipped the extra stalks in sugar and bitten into it. "Well, I was planning on making crumble bars later, but if you'd *rather* eat it raw, that's fine."

Phil's eyes lit up. "Oh, that's way fuckin' better." He dropped the stalk in his hand and collected them together on the table. "No eatin' any more, Ranboo, Niki needs it."

Ranboo eyed him. "Thank you for letting me know." His tone was dry. He looked at Niki. "I finished the lemon, what next?" He touched the edge of a plate, where there was a small pile of yellow wisps.

They weren't ignoring her, they were working together, however imperfectly. Niki smiled briefly at the duo. She pushed the cast iron pan in Ranboo's direction. "Rub it into the sugar with your fingertips. You want it to get aromatic. And once that's done, we're going to want to add the butter and salt and melt it so it's a rich syrup."

"I'll help with that," Phil said, coming up beside Ranboo.

"Alright. Thanks." She went to check on Techno. "How's the butter coming?"

"Beaten into submission, I think." Techno tilted the bowl towards her. "How's it look, boss?"

Niki looked. Butter and sugar were creamed together in pale waves. "Could you keep beating, and I'll add the next ingredients?"

Techno nodded, stirring while Niki broke the eggs in, one by one. She watched the butter and sugar become liquid and golden as yolks were added. "You're going to want to layer the rhubarb in the pan and cook it for five minutes, once the butter is melted," she said over her shoulder. "Just so the juice starts to come out."

"Got it," Phil and Ranboo said together. Niki smiled to herself as she poured a spoonful of vanilla into the batter. She was part of a team creating something again. And this time she was being listened to. She pulled her spice mix and flour closer with her off hand. "Now you keep mixing," she told Techno, "and I'll add the dry ingredients. Stop mixing as soon as the flour disappears."

The other man nodded again, focusing on the task, and she concentrated on sprinkling spoonfuls of the spice mix over the wet ingredients, and then the flour. It was supposed to go in slowly to mix together smoothly, but if it was mixed too hard it would go tough. Technoblade sniffed when she was halfway through adding the flour. "You using nether spices?"

"I am," Niki said, keeping her hand steady and moving the flour into the bowl without spills. Behind her back, she could hear Ranboo worrying that Phil was going to burn his fingers on hot butter, while Phil assured him that he was fine. "I thought the spices would mix well with the rhubarb." She'd also heard Techno criticise Phil's hot chocolate recipe as being insufficiently spicy, unlike the *proper* recipe with some heat in it. She'd looked up the uses of the nether spices she could find, and last night she'd baked a test batch of rhubarb pancakes to test the flavours together. Another spoonful of flour disappeared into the mix. It was really starting to look like a cake batter now, tan and speckled with spices.

"Huh." Technoblade glanced at her, then back to the bowl. "Nice." He paused the motion of the spoon. "That the end of the flour?"

Niki held her dry ingredients bowl over the batter and shook it. "That's the end." She looked back over at the other duo, who both had their hands on the cast iron. Niki blinked at the posture of the two men, hunched over the pot on the furnace like they were pushing something into it with their fingers. "Are you— what are you doing?"

"Uh, it doesn't work yet," Ranboo reported. He tucked his hands behind his back.

"Silk hands doesn't work on half a cake," Phil clarified, grinning. "We were wonderin' when that kicks in."

"Yeah, we should make more to bring home," Techno said from behind her. "It's really good."

Niki turned back to look at him. "It's not even done yet, Techno!"

He grinned faintly at her. "Stole a fingerful of the batter." He shrugged. "Plus, it's your recipe, even we can't mess it up too much."

"Yeah," Phil chimed in. "I was supposed to put in like a fuckin' palmful of salt into the rhubarb, right?"

Niki whirled to face him. "You didn't—" She saw the older man's teasing expression, and her frantic plan for re-starting the recipe cooled down. Niki took a deep breath. "Let's get this into the furnace," she said as answer.

Phil brought over the cast iron pan full of butter and sugar and fruit, holding it into place for the batter to be dumped on top. Niki poured the contents of the bowl in and then smoothed the top.

"I wouldn't really mess up the recipe," Phil said quietly, more serious. "I know you want it to be nice." He grinned. "And plus, I want some." He bent down to put some wood into the bottom of the furnace.

Niki slid the cake pan into the top of the furnace, then dusted her hands. "Alright," she said quietly back. "Thanks." She went back to her bag of supplies and pulled out a clock, resting it on the table. "Now we let that cook."

"What do we do in the meantime?" Ranboo asked, hands on the back of one of the meeting table chairs.

"Phil can teach us redstone," Techno said promptly. "I want to know how to build a pumpkin farm."

"Oh, fuck off." Phil sat down at the table and rested his forearms on it. "You do not."

"No, I woke up this mornin' and I said to myself, Phil," Techno told him. "I have *got* to know what's makin' the horrible noise below my house, and how it works, because I'm just so *curious*." He sat down across the table from Phil, hooking an elbow over the back of his chair. "I'm your student Phil, teach me."

Phil flapped a hand at him. "The noise hardly even carries up to your house, and we've got plenty of pumpkins now. We can make jack o lanterns and shit!"

"Oh, that's what I need, jack o lanterns, I can light my house with them." Ranboo nodded seriously. "That's going to bring my decorations to the next level. Thanks, Phil."

Phil blinked at him and then burst out laughing. "Fine, fine, you get really focused and build somethin' and then everybody lines up to fuckin' laugh at you." He tilted his head at Niki. "You got somethin' you wanna say?"

Niki was smiling slightly as she rummaged through her bag. "I think it was a fine farm." She glanced at Phil. "I had no idea you liked pumpkin that much. Do you need any recipes?" She'd missed this—fake conflict that wasn't real strife. Poking at her friends with no fear that jabs were going to turn vicious under her hand. She continued, keeping her tone innocent as Phil put his head down on the table. "I have pumpkin bread, some muffins, there's pie, I can make a couple different types of cake. Or there's a coffee flavour syrup! That's not going to be enough, but it could get you started."

"Fine," Phil groaned into the table. "Fuckin' fine. It was goin' overboard, I get it."

"Yeah Phil, you should know the Syndicate never goes overboard," Ranboo chimed in. "Nobody here would mine for sixteen hours straight." Niki glanced at him and Ranboo glanced back, shoulders held anxiously but expression bright.

"I get it, I get it," Phil flapped a hand at the others, not looking up. "Lay off." He lifted his head from the table, brushing his hair away from his face. "How's your city going, Niki?"

Niki had found the coffee machine she wanted in her bag. She measured spoonfuls of ground coffee into the bottom, screwing it together atop the water reservoir. "It's coming." She finished assembling it and placed it on top of the stove. "I was decorating one of the meeting halls the other day."

"Send me the tutorial and I'll see if I can help out," Techno said, a small grin pulling at his mouth.

Phil laughed. "*Actually*, Techno—"

"I'm not using a tutorial," Niki said at the same time. She smiled as she sat down. "All freehand."

Techno shook his head, a sage expression on his face. "Safer to use a tutorial. That way you know exactly how much glass you're gonna use."

"Or what if I want to experiment as I go?" She raised her eyebrows. "Maybe I want to be creative."

"Yeah, you don't understand creativity," Phil jumped in. "You can't just pick it out of a book, sometimes you gotta go with what fuckin' feels right!"

"But the extra glass, Phil." Techno leaned forward intently. "What if I don't want to dig up all that sand and get all that dye, when I could be doin' somethin' good with my time."

"Yeah, like golf," Ranboo said. Everyone turned to look at him. He anxiously picked at his tie. "Were we not making jokes? Not that golf is a joke. If you like golf that's

excellent for you. Niki, your city sounds good. Not that your city is a joke either!"

Niki threw her head back and laughed. Keeping up a conversation with this crew required jumping between topics like you were on a parkour course, but she loved it. The cake smelled good from the oven. "It's fine, Ranboo."

"Okay." Ranboo gently slapped the table for emphasis. "In that case I'm going in on golf. Better than digging sand for glass."

"You mined for sixteen fuckin' hours the other day!" Phil said in mock outrage.

On the furnace, the coffee maker started to bubble. Niki got up and stood by it, hand hovering by the handle. Techno saw her stand and got up to dig the coffee cups out of her bag. He held one up to his face, looking at the little purple glass and silver cup. "Huh. This the sort of coffee you put sugar an' milk in?"

The coffee was finishing, machine hissing as it finished boiling. Niki pulled it off the heat. "It isn't, actually." She poured it into the tiny containers, carefully filing to the top handle mark. "It's a special mix with End spices in it. It's supposed to be drunk black with something sweet." Ranboo had confided in her that he didn't remember where he'd grown up, but he also tended to get especially wistful around certain flavour combinations.

Techno glanced at her. "You made the recipe yourself?"

She used a skewer to test the cake. It came out crumb-free—cooked through. "I did."

"Cause you put a lot of things for other people in it, seems like." Techno reached out and nudged one of the cup handles, spinning it on the table. "Spices, and the rhubarb

for Phil, and the coffee for Ranboo. What'd you put in for you?"

Niki pulled the cake out and rested it on a kitchen towel for a moment. It needed to sit for a second before it was fully done. She grinned at Techno. "The core recipe is mine; I made it. I just added you all in 'cause I wanted to."

Techno's eyebrows went up. "Huh." He smiled slightly. "Guess that works."

"Is the cake out?" Phil stood up from his seat, peering over. "That smells amazin', Niki."

"Well, it's not done yet, let's not get too ahead of ourselves." Niki held a plate above the cast iron pan and held the hot edges with kitchen towels. "And we all made it, not just me."

"Yeah, but like, you brought the recipe—Oooo, damn." Phil said as Niki inverted the pan onto the plate and then carefully pulled away the cast iron. A rosy-red topping of caramelised rhubarb was revealed atop a spice cake, the whole thing steaming deliciously.

"Oh that looks amazing," Ranboo said.

"Guess we're pretty good at this," Techno chimed in.

Her friends were here, and she wasn't alone, and they'd made something delicious together. They listened to her, and argued but only as friends, and they made silly jokes. The cake smelled amazing. "I brought the recipe, but we all made it together," Niki said. "It's better cause we're all together. Thanks for helping." She was tearing up. She wiped at her eyes. "Sorry. Anyways. Who wants cake and coffee?"

water

She sits on the floor of the bakery, carefully wrapping a bandage around the blister on Tommy's finger. "I told you not to touch it until it was cool," she scolds him.

Tommy's face is still damp with tears, but he still manages a small smile as he nods. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. I'm not mad. I just don't want you getting hurt."

He rolls his eyes. "Because if I'm hurt, I can't fight," he recites. "I know."

Niki forces her own lips into a smile, one far grimmer than his. She makes a mental note to yell at Wilbur. "And also," she tells him, "because I love you, and I don't want you to be in pain." This time, her smile is a little more genuine.

"Right."

There's something about the moments like these ones—Tommy, twelve years old and allowed to act like it—that makes war worth it. Soon, they'll be free. Soon, Tommy and Tubbo and Fundy will be kids again, and Wilbur will be satisfied and Jack will laugh again and Eret will wear a dress instead of a uniform.

Soon, Niki will make bread because she wants to, not to feed an army that has almost stopped feeling like a family.

"Niki?" says Tommy, and she looks at him.

"Yeah, bud?"

"Will you kiss it better?"

And Niki's smile stops being forced at all, and she presses a kiss to the tip of Tommy's finger, and makes him promise to be more careful next time. Someday she'll teach him how to make a sourdough starter.

Someday soon.

flour

"For fuck's sake, Jack."

"I know, I know." He rolls his eyes as he says it. "Just give me a health potion and I can go back."

"I'm not going to do that!" The wound in Jack's side has already bled through his coat, and he's paler than usual. "Lie down and let me deal with it."

Jack sighs, but sits down on the bed and stays there as she rummages through her first aid kit to find a health potion.

"You could just give me the whole thing, you know. I'd be fine."

"Health potions don't work like that, and I know you know that. You can't keep going back to fight after getting injured. You have to let your body heal."

"I can't keep going back to fight?" snaps Jack. "Bullshit. We don't *have* anyone else to fight, Niki. Not unless *you* want to pop out a couple more child soldiers."

There's a stunned silence sitting next to him on the bed, weighing down the mattress. "I'm sorry," Jack says to the floor, almost whispering. "That was too far."

"Don't apologize," she tells him, even though he really should. "Just… just let me take care of you. Be the one person in this country who doesn't fight themselves to death."

He nods. He doesn't look up.

A quiet—more comfortable this time, closer to the peaceful hours they'd spend around each other back when neither of them had so much as heard the name L'Manburg—settles around Niki's shoulders like a shawl as she sets to work cleaning the gash in his side. Her hands barely shake when her thumb brushes the open wound and he hisses. There's blood under her fingernails, but she doesn't bother to clean it until the health potion has knitted closed the worst of the damage and gauze is wrapped around his ribs.

By the time she's done, it's almost dark outside. She hopes Eret has managed to convince Wilbur to let them get some rest; hopes the boys won't be fighting into the wee hours of the night again.

She stands back and surveys her work. It's not pretty, but it works, and Jack is alive and breathing, and that's what matters. He grimaces as he stands up, but that grimace almost turns into a smile when he spares one last glance at her before leaving the room, and she hopes he'll stay safe next time.

Even a month ago, she would have hoped there wouldn't *be* a next time. She knows better now.

yeast

Niki barely has enough time to pack Wilbur and Tommy a supply kit before they're rushed out of the country. Bandages and alcohol wipes; half a health potion; an almost-stale loaf of rye bread—she stuffs it haphazardly in a basket and nearly shoves them out the back door of her house. It's not ten minutes later that Quackity rings her doorbell.

"Niki," he greets, wearing a grin she's seen on Wilbur enough times to know it isn't going to last. "Just making sure you aren't hiding any, erm, *contraband materials*."

She tells him, "They left," because she isn't going to pretend they weren't here.

"That's good. And, you know, Wilbur and Tommy aside, I'd love to get to know you better. Vice President to citizen, you know. Our administration wants to be involved in our people's lives."

"Like hell it does," she says, and shuts the door in his face.

salt

The first thing she notices when she steps into the ravine that is Pogtopia is the smoke. It's not heavy enough to be fire, and not pungent enough to be dynamite, so she follows the smell into the cave closest to her and says to the darkness, "Wilbur, give me a cigarette."

The pinprick of orange light flares in an inhale. "What if I told you this was my last one?" he asks, and his voice is hoarse not from dust or ash but from exhaustion.

"Then I'd tell you to share."

She sits beside him on the stone floor, their backs against the wall of the cave, and he passes her the cigarette. It's been a while since she smoked, but the burn of nicotine and shitty tobacco is muscle memory all the same.

"How's Fundy?" asks Wilbur. Her eyes have adjusted enough that she can see him holding out his hand for the cigarette back. She doesn't give it to him.

"He's okay. He's not really talking to me all that much."

"Oh."

"It's hard for him. He misses you, I think." Niki still doesn't give him the cigarette back.

"Any more than he did before he left?"

"You should talk to him, Wil."

Wilbur laughs a little. "If he's giving you the cold shoulder, I'm pretty sure he'd shoot me on sight." She doesn't argue with him. "Just… just try to keep him safe, okay?"

"He can keep himself safe. Self-sufficiency was maybe the one thing you taught him."

"I know he *can*. I want you to make sure he *does*."

"I can't babysit him."

"I'm not asking you to. Just the little things. Remind him not to sleep in his binder. To eat."

"Wilbur," she tells him, "you're not a very good father."

She can't quite see his face in the dark, but she can picture the crinkle in his forehead.

"I know," he says.

"And I'm not going to be your son's parent just because you sucked at it."

"I know," he says.

"But I will make sure he eats."

"I know," he says.

Niki gives the cigarette back to him before she leaves.

knead

Her doorbell rings. "Who is it?" she calls out.

"It's me," answers Tubbo's voice, and sure, he's there when she opens the door, but he's not alone.

Quackity has a raw steak clutched to the side of his face, and he's in a worse state than she's ever seen him—one of his suspenders has come off his shoulder; the one eye not hidden by the steak has a dark circle so deep it's almost a bruise, and there's blood under his fingernails. He looks like he's been crying.

"Can we come in?" says Tubbo.

This isn't the first time she's had someone at her door needing help. Fundy comes to her when his hands are shaking too much for him to do his own t-shot, and Tubbo, as Schlatt's designated scapegoat, is never here less than thrice a week. Even Jack has been a few times, for bandages or a mended shirt or help shaving his head. But Quackity hasn't come by Niki's house since that first day, when Wilbur and Tommy left, and, up until now, he'd held a place in her head as Schlatt's equal, rather than just another one of his pawns.

By the looks of it, Quackity had thought so, too.

"He—" starts Tubbo, and then looks at Quackity.

"We've fought before, but it was just stupid shit," Quackity says, voice hoarse. "Stuff like me forgetting to wear my ring to work, or messing up some papers. And sometimes he'd hit me, but never *hard*."

"Put the steak down, Quackity. That's an old wives' tale, anyway," she tells him instead of responding to his story, and he looks grateful.

If she'd thought his right eye was bad, his left one is a warscene—a bruise pitted so deep into his face it's like his skull is showing through his skin. Some blood from the meat is stuck to his face, which doesn't help, but there's still purple red and pink and brown blooming across the space around his eyelid. "Jesus," she breathes, and then tries to pretend she didn't.

"Sit down," she directs him, pointing over to the bed that's barely hers anymore, after all the times she's had to play hospital. Quackity sits, and Tubbo hovers over him hesitantly, as she digs through the ice chest in the corner of her room; wraps a handful of ice in a tea towel.

It's visible how much it helps—the instant Quackity presses the ice to his swollen eye, his shoulders drop an inch and a half. "Thank you," he says, quiet, like he's afraid to be heard, then, "I should go."

He isn't wrong. Niki isn't going to tell him that.

Tubbo puts a hand on Quackity's arm. "I'll go with you."

She watches them walk, both limping slightly, towards the white house. She wonders if there's anything else she should have told them.

She hopes he returns the towel.

Irons in the fire

By Anarchy-schmanarchy

Niki knew there would be people who agreed with her, people who found Manburg's claims outlandish and cruel, but this… she picked at her nails as she saw the room fill up with people, citizens she'd passed on the street, people who'd heard the whispers of a resistance. She hoped - she prayed there were no spies. They'd been careful, only spreading the news to trusted people, but if a single person had called the guards…

The crowd was settling. The doorkeeper peeked into the room, giving her a thumbs up.

They couldn't fuck this up. *She* couldn't fuck this up. Wilbur was counting on her.

She climbed a chair, clearing her throat. The din didn't decrease. Cheeks flaming, she clapped her hands, drawing the attention of the gathered group.

"Friends! I'm so glad to see so many of you here tonight -"

"Who are you?" someone in the crowd yelled. "Where's president Soot?"

A mutter went through the crowd, and the rock in Niki's chest dropped to her stomach.

"He's not here," she said, raising her voice over the wave of muttering. "It's too dangerous! But that's why we're here, isn't it? Everything is too dangerous. But together, we can help each other out. We can help Wilbur out, I promise."

She stood stock-still as the crowd grumbled, every eye in the room on her. She was breathing too loud. She was too young, too fragile, they'd leave, they'd -

"How?" another person asked, and Niki breathed out.

***

"Just be careful with the oven," she instructed, pressing the dough into large rounds as she watched her newest assistant work.

The urchin rolled their eyes but did grab some mittens as she pulled the oven door open, coughing at the burst of heat that barely registered to Niki. "They're all golden, miss," they said, and Niki cursed under her breath, hurrying over to grab the mittens and pulling out the steaming cinnamon buns.

"Is that good?" they asked, and as Niki nodded they preened with joy. The buns did look nice. Carrot cake would have been better, but the taxes on local foods had skyrocketed as Schlatt tried to drive up import. She just couldn't afford it, not while trying to make sure she could make enough to feed everyone.

The bell to the shop portion of the bakery jingled and Niki gestured for the child to quiet down as she hurried out. None of her usual contacts came through the front, and her fears were confirmed as she spotted the broad shape of two guardsmen outside the window.

The threat, however, had already stepped inside.

"Welcome to Niki's bakery!" she chirped, smile broad and icy as she met the eyes of a certain fox. "How can I help you today, Archbishop Fundy?"

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"I don't know," the woman - Siri, she was called, whispered, barely audible in the low drizzle covering the night-dark streets. "The guards might still be around…"

Niki shook her head. "We don't have time to stand around longer." She stepped out of their cover, lugging the heavy container of fuel along as the rest of the group scurried behind her. She trusted that they'd follow - at least as long as she'd made sure the path was clear. The siblings, Vera and Chester, were steady as ever, but the new kid was lagging behind. The curfew in this part of town meant no one else was around, so they just had to be quick and pray no one noticed.

The drizzle intensified. She could hear her own heartbeat, a steady drum against the droplets hitting her hood.

Any moment a guard could yell out.

Any moment an arrow could pierce the air.

Any moment they could all be seized and thrown into prison to rot.

Any moment they could -

"Hey! Stop!"

"Run!" she exclaimed, heaving the container into her chest and setting off across the plaza, aiming for the alley. An arrow whizzed past, thudding into the woodwork of a nearby house, and Niki let out a sharp yelp. Just a few more steps. Just a few -

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"There is no next step! We're doomed!"

"The president is fucking mad, but we aren't -"

"What does it matter? My kids are starving and you're talking politics?"

Niki lifted the heavy bell leaned against the side of the table and hit it once, the heavy brass ringing quieting the swelling argument in an instant.

The three men at the center of it turned to her, all three looking angry, upset and scared in turn. Most other eyes in the room were turned to her as well, and Niki swallowed, fighting the steady reddening in her cheeks and the weight behind her eyes as she spoke.

"We're not leaving anyone to starve," she said, voice as steady as she could make it as her fingers curled and uncurled behind her back. "Everyone who's able to has chipped in. Those of you with kids get the first share."

She stood by the bread line, meeting the eye of every single person. Even when the bread ran out. Even when all she could hand out was courage. Her heart beat in her throat, but her smile didn't waver.

***

Her smile didn't waver.

"Anything else, Archbishop Fundy?" she asked, teeth bared in a broad smile.

"Niki," he whined, almost but not quite stomping his feet. Her smile didn't waver. "Come on, I just wanna talk! Like old times, you know? You're always busy."

He was twitching around the shop, never quite turning his back on either her or the guards stationed outside the door. Niki was very carefully not looking at them. Her smile couldn't waver. She couldn't make any sudden movements. The walls were thin - Niki wasn't taking chances. Not with them, and certainly not with *Fundy*.

"Running a bakery is fun and rewarding, but it's hard work," she said, practiced words falling from her lips with minimal thought. "I'm happy to get the opportunity to do it." One of the guards was scratching the back of his head.

Fundy took another turn around the bakery, complaining to himself and picking stuff up only to put them down. Her cheeks were starting to hurt. The other guard glared at a passing couple.

"There's a festival on soon, you should come. Hang out, you know? There'll be tons of people." She didn't nod, or shake her head, or fist her trembling hands in her skirts. Only some of that was a lie.

"A festival? How lovely," she replied, setting her gaze somewhere far away as Fundy started complaining about the weather or - something. Niki wasn't sure. She didn't make a habit of listening to traitors.

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"Traitors!"

The yells echoed behind them, drowned out by her gasping breaths.

Siri was running ahead of her, throwing herself to the ground to shove the sewer entrance open.

Niki tossed the fuel into the darkness with relish, swinging around to usher Chester and Vera into the opening. The siblings stumbled in with shared curses, Niki

looking to make sure they landed properly before turning to their last member.

The new recruit stood at the entrance of the alleyway, clearly hesitant.

Niki waved impatiently at him. “We don’t have time! Come down before you get shot!”

He still hesitated, and Niki wavered for a moment - he’d get shot before they questioned him, surely, and she heard the raised voices of the guards getting closer. But -

She groaned, darting forward to grab the boy by the shoulders and shove him into the sewer opening, stumbling along with him and pulling the doors close as the guards closed in. It wouldn’t hold for long, not once they realized it was there.

She turned to her team, breath heaving in her chest, and saw the newbie on his knees, scrambling away from all of them, fear in his eyes. Worse than that - regret.

Fuck.

***

“Fuck Schlatt and the horse he rode in on!”

The cheer rose in the bunker, loud enough to make Niki flinch even as she grinned. The speaker waved his hands, flush high on his cheek, pivoting on the table he was balancing on. “He’s a cunt, and so is every member of his shitty cabinet, and we’re gonna kick their ass so far out of this place they’ll never see the light o’day again!”

The cheer rose again, breaking into laughter as the man wobbled and tripped down the table into the waiting arms of his friends. Niki laughed along, before a tug on her sleeve distracted her.

“Hey, Niki?" a quiet voice came from her right. She turned, coming face to face with a young man, looking nervously at her. He was holding a small child, wrapped in a quilt and gumming at a carved wooden toy. He shuffled slightly. "I was gonna go join president Soot n'all in Pogtopia, but I gotta stay n take care of Linny here. But I

wanna help. What are we even doing here, stuck like fish in a barrel?"

"No no no," she interrupted, stepping closer. "We are *not* just sitting here. We are making sure Manburg can't win."

***

Niki’s fist clenched beneath the counter as she saw several of her regular customers pass by the shop, watching the guards warily. She was losing revenue at this rate, and with the recent tax hikes…

She needed Fundy out of here. It would have to be worth the risk.

“What do you want, Fundy,” she said, voice low, interrupting his natter about - whatever. He looked suddenly nervous, fidgeting as he stepped closer to the counter. He was holding a muffin, the confectionery turning to crumbs under his fingers.

“Whatcha mean, I’m just visiting my old friend, can’t I do that?” He hesitated. “Especially since all our other friends, you know, abandoned the country.”

Niki couldn’t help the way her lips curled, snarl building in her throat as she saw Fundy’s eyes go wide.

“I mean -”

“You’re the one who abandoned this country,” she spat, and she knew the guards would be in any moment, but her heart was slamming against her ribs and Fundy would *dare* - she slapped her hand down on the table, relishing in the way Fundy flinched.

***

The slap echoed through the empty sewers, but it did little to soothe Niki’s stinging palm or the incandescent rage in her chest.

“What was that,” she demanded, ignoring the muttering of the others behind her. Ignoring the heart beating in her throat, the fear threatening to stopper her throat. If he left, if they left, if they realized how dangerous this was-

"We - we might *die,"* the boy stuttered out. "It's too well-guarded, they'll know, my pa said -"

Niki shook him, the crack of skull against stone only fuelling the glare as she shut those traitorous words *down*, teeth bared. She wasn't Wilbur. She didn't have his pretty words. But she had learned a thing or two about being kept in line.

"If you leave now," she strained through gritted teeth, "you *will* die, because I will kill you myself. I swear on my soul, I will not let you kill us."

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"We have to stick together," she said, glancing down at the gurgling baby with a stiff smile. "Our friends in Pogtopia are counting on us. We have to help each other, so they don't have to worry about us."

***

"There are people dying for this," she spat, leaning over the counter, face just a breath away from Fundy's as she stared him down. "Good people. Strong people. Not like you. People who can't leave."

***

"And we will not falter," she whispered, staring the terrified recruit down. "We will keep going. We will keep feeding this fire. They will know we won't go quietly." She let the silence linger for a moment. "Are you with us?" she asked, the shaking man nodding frantically in the light of the torches.

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"We have to keep going, no matter what," she said. "For all of us."

***

"And you are *not* one of us," she spat, fists shaking. "Now get *out.*"

Wildfire

The wildfire consumes all. Once nothing more than a spark, it blazes now, defiant; the barriers keeping her tame have broken under her power, and she sets to burning all those who stand in her way. At the core of this uncontrolled flame, though, is that first spark: that there is some idea she must keep alive, and she will not let anyone silence it.

This section will center vicious, angry flames - both righteous fury and untamed rage. Here, Niki's restraint gives out; she leaves scars on all who try to chain her.

VoidPidgeon

Poem Beginning With Elektra On the Front Porch

Yen Andrew, p. 39

all you have is your fire

luna_eclipse_writes, p. 41

Niki takes up the sword to learn from the Blade himself, but there's a fire inside her that she can't hold back.

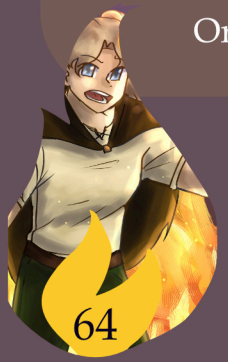
chrysalizzm

combustion

honeyblock, p. 45

All it takes for a fire to start is fuel, fresh air, and just the right amount of heat.

Or: Niki Nihachu, murder plots, and self-immolation.



Yeti

the ghost

elmhat, p. 57

In a post-Doomsday spiral, Niki plans to detonate what little remains of L'Manberg. She is stopped by a ghost that looks too much like Wilbur.

Beginning with Elektra On the Front Porch

By Yen Andrew

Alone! *Alone the whole poised force of my life is nothing against this–*
opening your mouth brushing back locks of pale peony hair you watch
water hurrying to fill in his man-made crevices:
before your two feet the world is an island of fallen bark untangling itself
in the wake of his departure. All around you hangs the smell of smoke,
of wood drying out in the noonday sun. What comes after
gunpowder still lines the hem of your lip. Call it baker's expertise:
You know that human ash can taste sweet after it's scattered but this
is a force neither living nor dead, here nor gone, this is a ragged coat holding
the insinuation of a boy, this is the shadow cast
by the fabric folding like veins of a riverbed drinking in
all the air of the room, this is Elektra drinking in
the half-light and feeling her stomach ignite.
The boy's body dissolved into the hill
clearing away an abandoned tomb for no body
but yours, short and soft in places,
pinched eyes and worn mouth, for empty
pans and empty promises, for leaving,
for you tearing out strands of your hair and him
saying things he'd meant as truths but could
never bring himself to keep to.
Not as the air grows brittle, you
alongside it. To survive
this next inferno, you must become
a knife, pure obsidian flayed
to a single point. Your
thumb is on his
lighter now. It's
already
too
late.

All you have is your fire
By luna_eclipse_writes

Under the light of the sea lanterns, Niki eats dirt again.

She tumbles on her side, limbs tucked, head protected, the way she was taught. Her hand darts out and finds the leather grip of her iron sword. She gathers herself despite the screaming in her muscles and stands again with brandished metal.

Her head pulses as the seconds tick by. The exertion is dizzying, and it burns with a fire that's addictive.

She could get used to this heat, and the way it burns away every troublesome worry of hers. She does not think in this state, she only *feels*.

She should have asked Techno to put the Syndicate's training room to use sooner. Philza outdid himself with the construction, creating an illusion of endless sky. The light above her is artificial, but in this moment it feels like the sun. A placebo in the grey arctic where they made their homes.

Techno doesn't even have sweat on his brow. His stance is perfect, of course, but his demeanor is casual and unthreatened. Like Niki is still a kitten whose claws haven't grown in.

She doesn't have to endure this. She doesn't *have* to know how to tape her hands so her bones won't break when she throws a punch. It would be easy to hide under Techno's cape, let him and Philza unleash the withers and rain hell on their enemies.

But Niki had liked the feeling of her hands dirtied with the ash of the L'Mantree. She didn't join the Syndicate for the damn book club.

So she went to Techno, all but begging him to show her how he wielded netherite to fell kings and tyrants. She needed this; her flames could only touch so much, and she would not be the Syndicate's weak link. She needs to have a purpose here.

Their swords cross again, and in a few clean swings Techno wrests Niki's out from her grip and pokes the point of his blade gently into her chest.

"You gotta keep your head clear when you pick yourself back up. You were still shaken, and your guard was down."

"Got it," says Niki, jaw clenched. "Another try."

Techno nods an 'okay' and readies himself. He waits for Niki to make the first move. The rational part of her knows it's just in her head, but Niki can't help but feel taunted.

She wants to land just one hit, one win.

For once in her life, she wants to *win.*

She's been kicked to the dirt so many times that it's all begun to coalesce into mush. She sees Wilbur, Schlatt, Tommy, and every other cog in the machinations that sent her life spiraling. They're laughing at her, lecturing her, goading her, or worst of all, *ignoring* her. The dismissal hurt like nothing else, when Niki realized she could scream her throat raw into a crowded room and still not be heard. She'd never been heard until she learned from her predecessors how to send a message in wreathed in violent flame.

The L'Mantree wasn't enough.

She needs justice. She's watched her life be wrenched away from her at the snap of a president's fingers, she's sewn rags until her fingers went numb to clothe a rebellion, she's watched her best friend salute proudly as he blew everything they built together to pieces.

It's not enough to watch TNT rain down from an obsidian grid as a joyful bystander, she needs to deliver that force by her own hand.

She puts all her grit into her next swing and hits something solid. There's no 'clank!' of metal against metal, but a cry of surprise.

"Oh my god!" Niki shouts. Her sword clatters to the ground.

She's carved a deep gash into Techno's forearm. Blood beads at the welt and trickles down to his wrist.

Impossibly, Techno cracks a smile. "Y'know, when I said

you were supposed to *disarm* me, I didn't mean it like that…" he chuckles.

Niki frets. On instinct, she reaches to touch the wound, then pulls her hand back. "Techno! I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to-"

Techno shrugs and uses his good arm to pat her shoulder. "You're good. Health pot will fix it right up."

He moves to where they keep a heap of chests by the beacon light, and Niki trails after him. She has to match each stride of his with two of her own. She winces as Techno leaves a small trail of scarlet in his path and realizes why Phil left the floor as natural earth.

"Stay there," she orders. She takes it upon herself to dig through their chests. The stash awed Niki when she first saw it; the whole Syndicate could live the rest of their days self-sufficiently on the goods that Techno and Phil have stockpiled.

She spots a ruby colored potion and takes it. Then she uncorks it before she passes it to Techno, and she catches a whiff of sweet watermelon scent from the bottle. At least she did something to help remedy her mistake.

Techno applies it topically, humming as he does so, and the seam of his skin stitches itself new again. No mark remains, and Niki can breathe easy again. It was shallower than Niki had thought (and horribly, some part of her is disappointed at that).

"Probably should've started with wooden swords, but I thought it was better to get used to the weight of the real stuff… I'm not used to this whole teaching thing," says Techno sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"And I'm not used to being a student," says Niki.

She is a self-taught baker, tailor, soldier, and arsonist. She knows how to scrape by on her own, how to sink her nails into the meat of a challenge and carve a path forward.

But just because she can do it alone, it doesn't mean it doesn't kill her.

She hasn't been able to rely on someone else for a long, long time.

Techno raises an eyebrow. "I couldn't tell. You pick up this stuff quick."

"I do?"

"You've got the instinct. Anyone can build up muscle memory with enough practice, but after that there's an upper limit to how far you can go, ya know."

"And you really think I'm one of those people, that can push higher?"

"Not everyone can do what you did to help bring down L'Manburg. It takes something special," he grins wide. "Don't lose it. It can be your *signature move*. We should write those down. Good for the Syndicate brand."

Fire is a fitting tool for an anarchist; it doesn't discriminate. It cleanses the rotted innards of old systems and clears the way for something new.

But Niki looks at Techno and sees something she didn't know she was starved for until now: a friend.

She laughs back with him.

Maybe not everything needs to burn.

Combustion
By Honeyblock

All it takes for a fire to start is fuel, fresh air, and just the right amount of heat.

"I mean," this one starts, Niki's voice tentative and quiet, "we could just… kill him."

There. Now she's gone and said it – carefully, as if speaking the words aloud will somehow bring them to life. Spilling light onto the thought that clings to her skin like gasoline, tacky between every hair that lines her arms, elbow-deep in it.

Still, nothing catches yet.

The words hang with modest confidence in the stony valour of the cell they sit in, deep in Eret's castle – their so-called war room. Heavy drapes smother the walls in an attempt to keep the cold from swallowing the two of them, pulling a hush over Niki's words with the softness of a winter quilt. It reminds her of a child's fort, almost – of blankets strung between chairs, of sleepovers, of gleeful secret-swapping and snuggling beneath bedspreads as the candles burn into the early morning. Although, she might be distracted by the exhaustion tugging petulantly at her eyelids.

Of course, the cosiness is somewhat broken by the crude sketches of Manberg's Whitehouse that lay on the table between them, and the sand and gunpowder ground deep beneath her fingernails.

Niki knows exactly who she is talking to, making this kind of suggestion. She watches Eret's expression as the words leave her mouth – the brief lift of their eyebrows, barely past their sunglasses, settling quickly into a steady kind of conviction. She isn't surprised by the ease with which they process the suggestion, their certainty. Despite what some might assume, Niki knows *exactly* where she is treading.

(Niki spares a thought for L'Manberg, imagines that perhaps Eret wore that same expression in the bunker the

others keep behind hollered taunts and white-pressed lips, whispers *just* too hushed to reach her ears. That thought makes her a little nauseous, though, so she casts it aside.)

"This would pretty much contradict your plan to keep things peaceful," Eret points out evenly. Niki lets out a tired breath, her fingertips flexing against the warm mug of tea Eret has so generously donated from their kitchens.

They're not *wrong*, is the problem.

"...is that a bad thing?" she asks. They shrug.

"It's not bad at all," they say. "We do these things for a purpose, after all. But if keeping the peace until the others are able to open up Pogtopia is your plan, then – "

"Peace isn't worth it," she interrupts them. "Peace isn't worth *this*."

"I know." They're trying to sound reassuring. She almost appreciates it. "I just – I can't let you go without telling you the truth, Niki. And that is the truth."

It's not helping anyone, but Niki can't stop the sigh that heaves from her chest, heavy coals in her gut that roll up the line of her sternum and flood her mouth like smoke. She slumps forward in defeat, her mug dropping with a *thud* right atop the sketchy outline of the Whitehouse's roof, all jumbled wood and cobblestone – has Schlatt sunk his fingers into that, too? Replaced it with some polished quartz to admire his ugly fucking reflection in, as her home rots around him? Her chin sinks downward, and even the steady flickering of Eret's breaths can't do much to pull her from the tar she's stuck in.

"...I know you aren't comfortable right now," Eret says, finally. "But if we do this, and he *knows* you did it – and he *will* know – I can't promise that he won't make your life much, much worse. There's only so much I can do." They pull a tense breath through their teeth, like biting back a wound. "I *wish* I could do more, I just – "

"I understand," Niki soothes them, pulling herself up onto her elbows, and even though *she* is supposed to be comforting *them,* a hand comes to reach across the small table and fold itself over hers. Eret's fingers are shards of ice against her skin, an anchor pulled from freezing depths, colder than she was expecting. Her pulse hammers in the meat of her wrist, fire-hot.

"Wilbur and the others will come eventually," they remind her.

Will they?

Niki banishes the thought. Of course they will. They promised. *Wilbur* promised.

She probably looks mildly desperate as she looks up at Eret – their brow dips comfortingly, despite the shadows marking the space beneath their eyes.

"Will you come with us?" she asks.

Their expression twists delicately.

"I'll try," they promise. "I'll try, at least."

And with that, Niki finally lets the fiery dream go.

"Okay," she relents, Eret's hand cold in hers. "...okay."

But still, she quietly stokes the fire in her chest.

(Oh, Niki is *angry.* Like her flag, she is burned at the edges – ashes poured into the smouldering firepit, sustained on nothing more than her own snuffed-out kindling. But the night is long. The fire cannot burn itself up yet.)

***

L'Manberg is going to die.

As far as Niki is concerned, it's *about fucking time.*

Forget the storm brewing outside, steeped in soul sand and Dream's shrill voice – something *twitches* beneath Niki's skin, flooding her veins with shuddering sparks of lightning-adrenaline until they shrivel into knots. There is something lodged deep in her throat, right where it hollows into the chasm of her chest, a starlit fire with her heart thumping fast and bloody at its centre. Every breath tastes like smoke, pricking her eyes with tears that stubbornly refuse to break.

No one else can see it. Jack, ranting and raving at her shoulder as she storms towards her city – he can't see the firelight, can't feel the cinders lining the awkward crevices of her flesh, can't hear the crackling rush that leaves her dizzy and deafened.

(You're going to let them throw you to the flames, too? she wants to demand. *Don't you know I'm burning? Can't you see it?)*

"You're one to talk," she spits instead, throwing a seething glare over her shoulder. "After that speech today, I would have thought you and Tommy were *best friends,* huh? You don't sound as angry as you *say* you are."

That was a low blow, and Jack splutters in indignation. "Not – *of course I'm angry,* Niki! How could I not be, the guy fucking *killed* me!"

"If you really were angry," she retorts, "you wouldn't be standing by his side – you wouldn't stand up there next to him and tell the rest of us what to do, Jack. You wouldn't – "

"Ay," he exclaims, a warning crow. His boots pedal against stone as he wheels around ahead of her, scowling, a finger jut out furiously. "I'm not – "

"We take down L'Manberg, we take down *Tommy* – it all goes *down,* Jack!" A laugh crawls its way up her throat, rung by rung, leaving prickling midsummer writhing beneath her skin. When the sound erupts, she almost

doesn't recognise it – it rings loud, a hysterical echo of her own voice. "It comes down with us."

"This isn't *about* L'Manberg, Niki! You don't get that!"

"How is it *not?"* she counters. "When did the new government stop listening, Jack? Dragging us down with them? When they exiled *Tommy*. When *Tommy* decided to make enemies with Dream."

"So?" Jack hurls back. "Both of them can go fuck themselves, as far as I'm concerned – "

" – and I *agree,* Jack – "

"No, you don't!" he snaps. He looks like he wants to bury his head in his hands and wrap them into fists by his side all at once, jerky as a puppet with cut strings. "You're just – this isn't about L'Manberg at all, Niki, you're just making it about that because of – "

"Because *what,"* she snarls, and Jack flinches.

"It doesn't matter," Jack says hastily. "What I mean is, getting rid of Tommy is all I care about. Him, Dream, whatever! All this conflict, this fighting – if we *took a stand* against any of them we might actually stand a chance at changing things around here for once! If we could just get rid of them all – "

"So why don't we just *kill him,"* Niki blurts out.

Those six, *simple* words fall from her mouth with as much force as a meteor falling to the earth. Jack's raving mouth goes quiet and slack.

The walls of her city swim around her, smothering. The silent, unfeeling greyness wraps its icy hands around her throat, and begins to squeeze.

"No, Jack – I can explain," she says quickly, as if she's not only now turning the scorched pieces of the thought over in her mind. But fire doesn't *lie.* It just reveals what was

there the whole time – seeds waiting to flourish, or worthless ash. "Think about it! He never learns, just goes around destroying our things and causing trouble, causing *wars* – what if it all just… went away."

"Went away," Jack echoes.

She can't place the tone in his voice.

"You said it yourself, didn't you? He killed *you*. It's only fair." Never mind that Tommy is on his final life – two deaths for L'Manberg. Worthless, isn't it? "We could make it look like an accident, even. No one would have to know it was us. He – Tommy wouldn't even have to know, if we wanted."

It's only then that she looks at him properly – and Niki had taken Jack's silence for judgement, stripped bare every piece of kindling she could find, anything to stack upon the bonfire. But she realises –

This quiet is *contemplative.*

"I mean," Jack starts, slow. He holds himself stiffly, arms folded over his chest, as if he's keeping his own fire safe from the winds that would snuff it out. "Is that what you want?"

…is it?

Niki tries to imagine Tommy, dead – silent, still, burnt down to nothing. She tries to imagine the fiery cataclysm, the regrowth from the ashes. She comes up empty.

Does she want him dead? Cold, snuffed out, dead?

Does it matter? part of her whines, impatient.

"I want him to know," Jack bites out, drawing her back to reality – and Niki stands sole witness as those telltale cracks start to show, watches that glimmer-spark catch as a deep, wallowing fury spills into his face. "I want him to *hurt,* Niki."

They stand there, the two of them, cradled in the cool heart of Niki's city as his words sink in. They're cruel. They're brutal, devastating and *ravenous,* the kind of wildfire that takes lives. Tommy's, hopefully. Niki can already feel the flames scorching her palms, can feel the sticky, weeping burns that wrap 'round her wrists like shackles to her own fury.

Niki finds she is okay with that.

"Tomorrow," Jack continues – keeping his distance, now. He might act like the fire isn't there but Niki can *see* the kindling ignite, ready to burn. "Tomorrow, I'm fighting for L'Manberg. I'm not gonna tell you what to do, but that's what I'm doing. After that… I'll think on it."

What a foolish thing to say. Jack, of all people, should know – fires like this rarely pass without leaving scars.

"Of course," she replies, smiling graciously. "Just think on it, won't you? And keep this between us."

"Yeah, right," he mutters, already turning to leave. "Get some rest, Niki."

Here? Please. "You too, Jack," she calls to be polite, and watches as his silhouette is swallowed by the shadowy staircase leading to the world outside of her little bonfire.

She does not sleep. The fire is far too bright for that – even as she shuts her eyes against it, she cannot extinguish the burning light.

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There are specific ways to put a fire out.

It's rarely enough to just throw water over it. Douse it all you like, but the cinders – glowing soft crimson in a bed of ash, hot to the touch – will remain. Even when the spark dies, when the kindling is burnt down to nothing, the embers stay. And the fire continues to burn.

Wilbur returns – he lives, breathes, he walks and talks and steals and *lies* – and the slow-burning embers in Niki's chest return with him.

She descends upon the arctic pines in a fresh whirl of rage, a trail of snapped wood and bleeding sap in her wake – desperate to get *out. Nemesis* is the name she took, and she had *him* in mind when she chose it, nestled in his grave of gunpowder and ash. Now she's the one burning, tearing jagged branches clean from her path with gritted teeth and chipped fingernails. She cries out, a guttural shout, in frustration.

Today was supposed to be a good day. She managed a brief nap that morning, falling asleep over her workbench by Techno's birthday cake. She got down breakfast before leaving home, *and* a cup of tea from Phil as they tipped blood-red dye into the fireworks' breaks. Techno was happy – he doesn't always like to show it, too vulnerable and soft-bellied, but he was. Phil and Ranboo were happy. *Niki* was happy.

Today was supposed to be *good.*

The next cry is an awful sound – half-keen, half-howl. Trust Wilbur to ruin anything *good.*

"Niki?"

Phil. Niki pulls her hands into tight fists by her chest, looking back at him with a sugar-sweet-welcoming smile – *he can't know anything is wrong. He won't believe her. Wilbur's already won him over.*

Phil recoils with a wince.

"Are you…" he tries, but he shakes his head. "Okay, I'm not even going to try that. Niki, look, I know you're upset. It's okay – "

"It's *not* okay!" she blurts out, reflexive – the words burn against her throat in their haste to make themselves heard,

more feeling than thought – and Phil raises his hands in surrender.

"I mean, you're probably not wrong," he soothes, and his chin drops with a sigh. "I'm sorry. We should have mentioned him, but all this shit going on with Dream and Sam, and then Tommy, and…" his voice trails off. "It was a shitty mistake. No one wanted to, like, catch you off-guard or anything back there, okay?" He tries for a smile, takes another small step forward. Niki flinches.

"How could you not tell me, Phil?" she demands. "Not – not tell me that he's staying right *here* – "

"He doesn't have anywhere else to *go,"* Phil says, as if it's supposed to sound reasonable. "It's not meant to be permanent, I can tell you."

"Not meant to be permanent," Niki echoes. She feels almost delirious, light-headed, sticky with fever. "He shouldn't be here at *all* – "

"Niki – "

"You don't understand!" she cries. "You weren't *there,* Phil. You didn't see what happened to him. What he became." The blaze roars in her chest, lighting every thread of muscle and sinew aflame, flooding her vision with blinding light. "He's a liar, he takes people and he *uses* them and we were all too *stupid* to see it coming," *but not this time.* "He left us, he *hurt* us and then he died and he was gone and – he's supposed to be *dead!* It would be better for everyone if he would just *stay* that way! If I have to take matters into my own hands to protect this server, to protect *us,* I will. I will. I *have* to. If we just – "

The fire thins just long enough for Niki to see Phil's face. Clear, cold – everything that Niki, in this moment, is not.

For the briefest second, her wildfire-heart stops beating.

"...he's my *son,* Niki."

Heady panic spills into the flames like gasoline. "I – I know how it sounds, Phil, but I – "

"Do you think I'm *proud* of everything he's done?" Phil's voice is cool, steady – his eyes are splinters of ice in the hollows of his face, not quite judgemental but *disappointed,* and that, somehow, is worse. "Do you think I'm proud that my son made this – this government that hurt people? That *he* hurt people?"

Niki pulls her breath in with a loud, pathetic sniffle. "I thought the Syndicate was supposed to fight tyranny."

Phil almost looks sympathetic. Almost.

"I know you're upset," he says. "And I know I'm not one to talk on the matter, either. But – I knew, in that room of his, that he was never going to make it out of there alive. Whether it was me, or him, or someone else. I knew that."

And he fixes Niki with a stare that makes her feel very foolish, very mortal, very *cold.*

"But that was the worst fucking thing that has *ever* happened to me. The worst."

Her voice is caught in her throat, burned silent. It's just the roar of lonely inferno in her ears, and the thunderclap of her incendiary heart.

"I'm not telling you to forgive him, Niki. Shit, if I were you, I don't think I could either, to be honest. But I'm not gonna let you do this to yourself." And then that awful gaze passes, and behind it, he just looks very sad. "Take some time to cool off, if you need, but – come back home after. Tell us you're alright."

She thinks he might reach out to her, the slightest shift in his shoulders – but he thinks better of it, and turns to leave.

"He's going to betray you too, Phil!" Niki shouts, frantic, each sharp word dragging sparks against her teeth. "He can't trust you, he can't *love* you – he's going to leave you

up in flames, and you're not – " she spits smoke over these words, bitter and acrid on her tongue. "You're not going to know where you went wrong."

Phil just snorts quietly, or maybe sighs.

"I'll see you back home, yeah?" he calls back. "Techno still wants to train soon."

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Niki doesn't return until cinder-dark nightfall, trudging through snowtracks with bitter, aimless petulance. Like a moth to the flame she slinks past Phil's cabin, upturned face washed in the warm glow of lanterns inside, and watches as Wilbur laughs at something Phil's said.

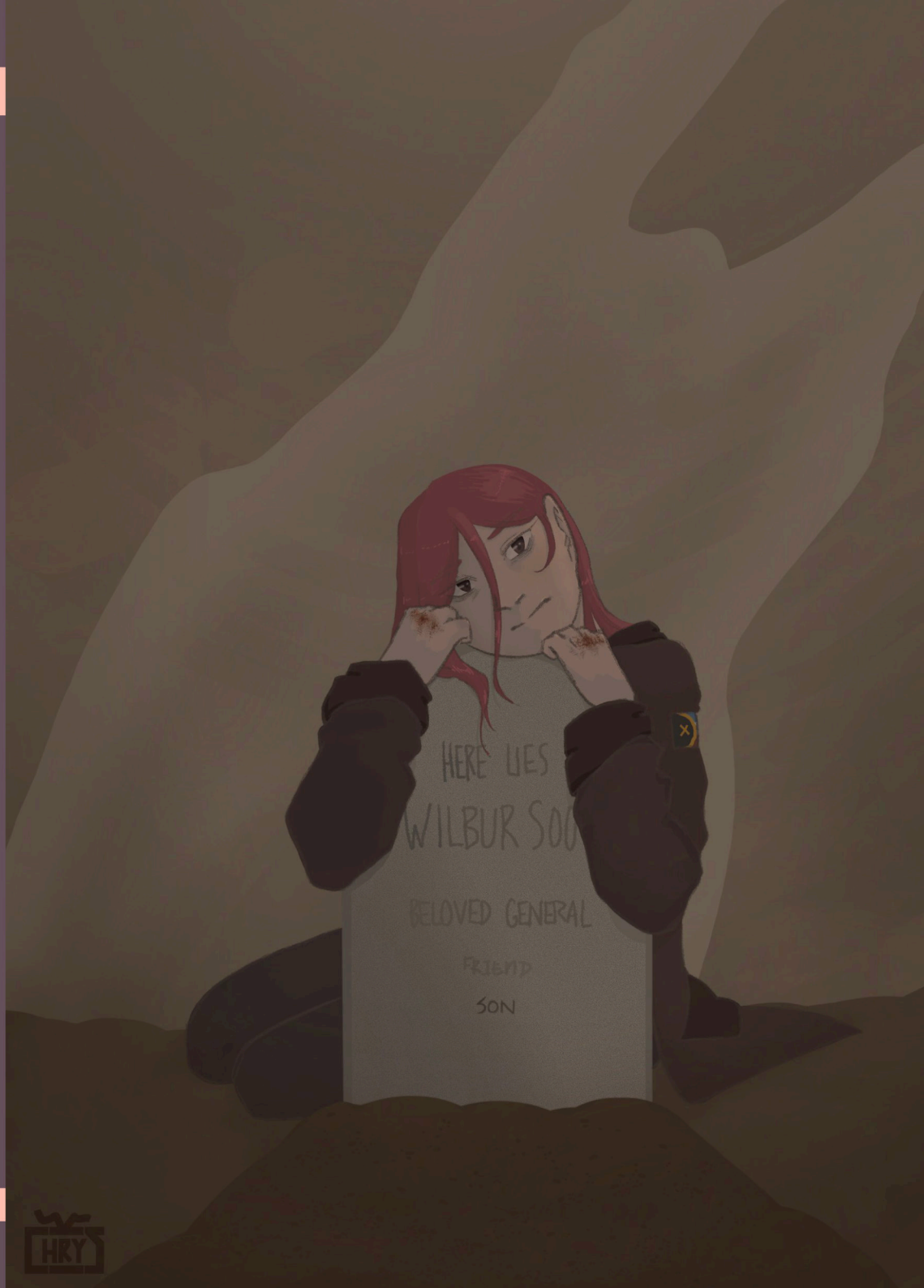
She was sitting at that kitchen table not fourteen hours ago. Now, *he* does.

Her fingers wrap around the hilt of her axe.

She considers letting the fire swallow her, gunpowder and blood and sand tipping into hot glass, just the way it did last November – of dragging Wilbur down with her until they're both burning, forever, in the depths of hell. He'd deserve it. At this point, she might fucking deserve it too.

Her heart is a blistering coal-stone, and her vision clouds with smoke. The scars marring her hands ache.

Oh, who is she kidding? Niki has always – *always* – been the first to burn.



The Ghost
By Elmhat

Days later, and the crater still stank of gunpowder. It gathered in the air like a warning, a threat, coloring the sky a shade of gray that Niki knew would not change with the weather. Cut deep enough and a wound will scar.

There was no L'Manberg anymore. And yet, even after the streets had been bombed to bedrock and the survivors had long since fled, the black grid remained: proud and unscathed, along with the stray builds at the outskirts that had escaped the worst of the blasts. A testament to the nation's history, or a mockery of it.

As Niki had clambered amongst the rubble, trailing the last of her TNT behind her, she decided that this would be a lot easier if Dream had just finished the job.

She stood in the shell of what was once *the button room*. Surveying her work. It had been Wilbur's symphony once; his master plan, his final encore, to tear down what no longer served him. The note that everyone would remember him by—or, that was, until Dream and Technoblade had made the original damage look like little more than a scratch. Maybe it had been, if it could be rebuilt so easily. Niki didn't know if they intended to rebuild again. She wasn't going to give them a chance to try.

Niki did not have a button. What she did have, however, was a match.

She had covered as much of L'Manberg as she could, with the gunpowder available to her. The crater has been nightmarish to traverse; her pants were shredded and caked in dried mud, as was her coat, and she was pretty sure that was blood she could see through the holes. It stung. And her legs were aching, and so were her arms, and *gods*, maybe she just wanted to go down with the whole damn ship.

It felt right to do it here. It felt, for better or for worse, like Wilbur was at her side now. Maybe he was even a part of her. A comfort, and a curse. She supposed that Wilbur—the *real* Wilbur—had never really left this room.

"Hi, Niki!"

Wilbur's voice. *Wilbur's voice.* Niki pivoted, stumbled, snapped around to see—Ghostbur. Only Ghostbur.

"*What are you doing here?*" she hissed. She couldn't tell if her vision was blurring or if that was just how the ghost looked. *Breathe in.* Bad time to spiral. *Breathe out.*

"I was just following these powdery trails on the ground. And they led to you!" Ghostbur gestured down at the redstone connecting the explosives. He frowned. "Niki, I think you might be leaking."

Niki hid her face in her hands; her heart was pounding out of rhythm. *Breathe*, she repeated, *it's just Ghostbur.* Wilbur wasn't here, Wilbur would *never* be here, Wilbur was *gone*. See?—even the ghost's voice was different: soft and ethereal, like the wind through leaves.

"I'm not *leaking*, Ghostbur, I'm not— You need to go. It's not going to be safe here." Her own voice was grounding. This feeling, the panic—it threw her back into Doomsday. Seeing Ghostbur for the first time, not knowing he existed. Thinking Wilbur was really back. Stumbling from explosion to explosion in a haze—some hers, some not—needing to *destroy* and needing to *get out*. Only once the chaos had settled did she learn the truth. Not Wilbur, but his shell; not a man, but a memory. But she was deathly sure, as she was sure of her own name: the terror of that day would never truly leave her.

Ghostbur smiled back. "Oh, don't worry about me, I'm already dead! Actually, I think I died *here*, so this really *isn't* a safe place, ha! It's like a big circle, if you think about it. Like I'll always end up coming back here."

Niki let him talk. He sounded like a kid: lost in his head, without a care in the world. It was disturbing to witness what Wilbur had been reduced to. How much of himself had made it into this new, hollowed vessel? Had any? Niki didn't even know which answer she would prefer. She couldn't handle this right now.

"I do think you should get that checked out, though," the ghost continued. "Leaking red stuff is usually a bad thing in humans, I've learned."

"It's not *blood*, I'm *using* it— Stop standing in it!"

Ghostbur looked down; there was a puddle of redstone smudged beneath his shoe. He stepped back, laughing. "Oh. Sorry, Niki! Sometimes I forget how much of a physical form I can have."

A silence fell. Niki broke eye contact, hoping the ghost would lose interest.

"So what are you doing with it then?" he asked.

Niki shook her head, gritted her teeth. She wasn't anywhere near ready to have this conversation. Not with *him*. But she took a breath, and she closed her eyes, and she forced a kind of calm over herself; in body, if not in mind. She had to be patient here, or Ghostbur might get panicked, and then he could end up telling the whole server about what he had seen here today.

"You said you always come back here, like a circle." Niki spoke slowly, patronizing—the same way people sometimes spoke to her. She paused after each sentence, waiting for Ghostbur to nod along. "Well, let me tell you something, Ghostbur. Everything's like that. Everything's a— a big circle. You know, history, it doesn't change, it *repeats*, over and over again."

Ghostbur's face screwed in confusion. His lips moved minutely as he took a long, drawn-out moment to piece together what Niki had just told him.

"Like a wheel?"

"Yes! Yes, like— like a wheel." She took a breath; she had to think. How did parents explain something serious to a child?

She slowed her speech, careful and deliberate. "I don't know how much you—*remember?*—about Wilbur, but Wilbur… When he was in charge, and he was trying to take L'Manberg back, most people agreed that he was crazy. His *own* people." *Laughing. Cigarette smoke and gunpowder and a laughing empty cavern where no one else could hear.* "We agreed that— that this *violence*, that all of this chaos, it wasn't the answer. But then when *those* people were in charge, after you— after Wilbur died, those same people… just wanted the same violence that Wilbur wanted."

Tubbo's government had called themselves butchers. How soon after he came to power did he forget his own butchering—shot and scarred at his own speech?

But maybe that was what they had always wanted. Maybe that was why, when they stood in the ruins of the Community House, staring the perpetrator of their misery in the face, they had instead allowed Tommy to *lead* them into the coming slaughter.

"I didn't know that," said Ghostbur. "You know, you're very smart, Niki!" She couldn't help but feel that she was being talked down to—or, more likely, that Ghostbur wasn't really listening. "So, is all of the powdery stuff going to make L'Manberg better again?"

Yes. L'Manberg will be better when there is no evidence that it ever stood. Niki's instinct was an obvious lie, to tell him that everyone would live happily ever after, but gazing into those wide, wide eyes—*Wilbur's* eyes—she caught herself hesitating.

"No, Ghostbur," she said slowly. "L'Manberg… has to go."

She witnessed, for the first time, the smile fall from his face. "Go?"

"Yes! Go!" Niki snapped. "Because even after Dream and Technoblade and— and— and everyone else— there's still parts of this horrible, *horrible* place left standing!"

"But I thought everyone liked L'Manberg?"

Niki laughed at that, low and guttural. "Oh, you think I *liked* it? Really." She stalked towards him. It was a strange thing, to feel herself slipping. "L'Manberg survived on lies, on murder and selfishness and— and *hate*, I mean— did you *see* the people running it? Did you see what they *did* to people? To *me*? That's not my home, that is my *prison*. It was just a graveyard, for those few good memories where I was— was *dumb* enough, to think it would last. But, no, of course you wouldn't know that! Of course you wouldn't! No one ever cares enough to ask how *I* am feeling."

Why was she even explaining it? She didn't owe it to him, she just needed him *gone*.

There was a match in her pocket. She could end this right now. The explosives were set. No one was around to stop her. Maybe, if she was lucky, the blast would take her out with it.

Ghostbur was so small now. He looked close to tears. "I care about how you feel…"

"You don't! You *don't*, because you don't even know what pain is! You don't know how it feels to *hurt*, to lose *everything*, you just— you're in your happy little world where everything's perfect!"

"Why are you angry with me?"

"I'm angry with *everyone*!"

"You… you know I'm not Wilbur."

Niki turned away too late. A sob ripped from her throat.

There was no hiding it; hot tears bled down her cheeks, and her legs were trembling, dropping her to the ground. She couldn't see. Couldn't breathe, through wails that sounded more like screams. Every heave clawed at some buried wound, tearing it open, throwing the remains at her feet like a chewed up dog toy—it was all on display now, and she brought her arms over her head; pulling; shaking; willing herself to melt into the stone.

She felt Ghostbur's hand on her shoulder, too tired to shove him away. An awkward gesture, as if neither of them knew how to proceed. But, slowly, Ghostbur began rubbing circles into her back, pulling her close. She didn't resist. His sweater was warm; her face was buried in it.

"H-He *left* me," she choked out. "Why did he leave me? Why?" The embarrassment only made her hate Wilbur more. "He told me he would come back for me, that he would *protect* me. He said it would get better."

The wound was raw and open, was still spilling blood, even months since Schlatt was dead and gone, and the

terror was cutting, *paralyzing*, strangling the breath from her lungs as she sobbed into Ghostbur's chest. Wilbur had been the only buffer—how *stupid* she was, to think him her savior! But in those few fleeting moments with him, nestled in the heart of Pogtopia, she couldn't help but feel… safe. Content. Even when she saw him slipping, and the fear began creeping in, then the violence, the *pit*—he still couldn't take that feeling away from her. That light at the end of the tunnel, that had been real.

The worst part of Wilbur's betrayal was that he made her believe he was better than them. He made her a fool. *Naive little Niki*, never learning her lesson. Well. She had learned now. And no one was ever going to hurt her like that again.

"I-I miss him *so much*," she said. Not Wilbur; not really. It had taken her a while to realize that the friend she lost had never existed.

Ghostbur only held her there, silent. Listening to her leveling breath. Niki hated herself for allowing this; Ghostbur acting like he understood, when he had *no idea* what she was going through. But… it was nice to have someone here. To let her talk, without shutting her down. She was lowering her guard too much, she realized. She felt like someone else, or maybe just another version of herself: the one who trusted a tyrant.

She didn't know how long it had been, but she was surprised when Ghostbur finally spoke. "I miss Friend," he said.

Niki blinked up at him. He was looking out over L'Manberg, at the grim skyline where buildings used to stand. She wondered what it was he was seeing.

"When I come back here," said Ghostbur, "sometimes I still hear his *baas*."

He smiled then, and there was emotion in his eyes that Niki hadn't even thought him capable of feeling. Couldn't he only remember joy? That was what she had been told. Perhaps she had misjudged him, in some small way.

L'Manberg was a graveyard, it was true. A wasteland, and a tomb; a monument to what had once stood; to

Friend, and to all those who had fallen; to the vision of the proud and honest nation that never truly was. It deserved a resting place. Then, perhaps, the grief might pass.

"I need to go," said Niki, voice thick with tears. She was gone before she heard Ghostbur's reply.

L'Manberg deserved a resting place, but Niki could not be part of it. She was only leaving it behind for those who would still come here to mourn it. Nothing more. And maybe she hated herself for giving into that empathy for the ones who had never spared her a second thought, and maybe she would never stop resenting them for it, but—this wasn't *her*.

In the end, she didn't know what she wanted. Perhaps she never would. But the one truth in her mind, blazing brighter than that damn tree: she never wanted to set foot in this fucking place again.

Pyre

The pyre is a farewell. Her flame takes the past and the future under its wing, devours and sings lullabies, solemn and gentle. There are new beginnings on the horizon, and the funeral pyre - cruel and kind both - guides all dying souls to their next destination.

This section will center the duality between mercy and destruction, and the metaphorical rebirth that takes place in between: flame as something that destroys, but offers up new beginnings from the ashes.

It's Over
Cate, p. 71

Niki visits the button room after Wilbur blows up L'Manburg.

routeriver

thello

Azurecake16

DesolateDiver

Fish

to rise after the fall
willowsandwonders, p. 76

Niki's been alone in her underground city for what feels like forever, drifting through a cycle of self-blame, anger, and respawn after respawn. One day, the urge strikes her to bake a loaf of bread again. She'll need to start clawing herself up from rock bottom to get there.

mortui vivos docent

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TNT
TNT
TNT
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AZURE CAKE16
2024

It's Over
By Cate

The sun rises against a blushing pink sky to paint the smoking remains of L'Manburg in soft orange. Ash and grit dances in the air. Even through a thick cloth mask, the rancid stench of old blood assaults Niki's nose and makes her head spin with nausea. Still, she presses on. Over rubble, across craters, through fallen buildings, Niki moves forward.

A garden used to be here. A pretty little cottage over there. An ugly statue of Wilbur on that hill. By technicality, it's all still here. Blown to smithereens and smashed into bits, yes, but nothing was *taken*. Not really. L'Manburg can still be rebuilt. Tubbo is already making plans to salvage the broken pieces of their government and has started on the designs for a better, safer city.

So why doesn't it feel that way? Why does she feel like she should've said goodbye to this place a long, long time ago?

Wilbur could probably tell her. He'd tip his head and scratch thoughtfully at his chin for a few moments before saying something aptly poetic that wouldn't heal the aching hole in her chest but would still, miraculously, make her feel better. Prime, he drives her nuts. Drove.

She kicks a rock and it goes tumbling down the hill, making a nasty *crack!* when it hits the bottom. They all expected it to end like this. Her, Fundy, Tubbo, Tommy— they all saw the thing Wilbur became in Pogtopia. It crept through the ravine wearing Wilbur's face and smelling of smoke, not fully present and not quite alive. Everyone assumed some parts of him just wouldn't come back after the war.

She just wishes they assumed wrong.

It doesn't matter, though. She's made it to her destination.

The entrance to the button room is sealed shut. Cobblestone blocks spill out from where the mouth of the cave would have been, blocking any would-be pursuit. Niki summons a pickaxe from her inventory, about to swing, and—

Her breath catches in her throat and she freezes at the threshhold, heartbeat pounding in her ears. Is she really doing this?

Yes, she decides, she is. She swallows her apprehension and slams her pickaxe through the wall.

"Have you ever thought about what you want to do after all of this is over?" Wilbur's voice echoes in her mind as she works, rock and dust falling around her. *"About how you want your life to turn out?"*

Niki doesn't know when he asked that, so she doesn't know how she answered. One year, two years, six months, six days; all blurs together. All of Wilbur blurs together.

It could've been the morning after they won L'Manurg's independence, when they were both so full of hope and relief and pride. It could've been the day that Quackity defected and joined their side, when the fight to take down Schlatt became more than just a pipe dream. Or it could've been when Niki told Wilbur she wasn't going to back his campaign for President. But she can't remember, so she doesn't care.

It takes a long time for Niki to mine through the wall but eventually she manages it. The rock splits and she coughs, waving the dust out of her face with her free hand. She pulls out a torch and holds it up to get a better view of the room.

The room where Wilbur Soot decided to destroy everything he loved is a cramped, dirty little place. Rough stone presses in from every side except one, where a soupy brown waterfall cascades like an ugly wet wall. Every inch of the floor is covered in garbage and debris. Glints of pale sunlight peek through the rushing water every once in a while, like even the morning is begging Niki to go anywhere but here.

She sighs a long, exhausted sigh. She doesn't know what she expected to find here. Closure? Answers? Wilbur was never a fan of either of those things. It was always puzzles and mysteries and strange metaphors with him, like he was cursed to speak only in riddles.

Niki collapses to her knees, feeling something hot and wet bubbling in the back of her throat. They had made it so far. The war was won, they were *so close* to having real, tangible freedom and Wilbur ripped it all away. This dark, grimy, empty room can't be all that's left of his legacy.

Her hand brushes against something soft and she looks up in surprise. Worn fabric, dotted with patches and gray with dried mud— Unmistakably Wilbur's trenchcoat.

She sits back on her knees, astounded. Not once in the better part of the last year did she ever see him take his coat off. It collected dirt from every place they'd ever been, and Niki could date every stain and tatter like counting rings on a tree.

It shouldn't be here. This thing Wilbur loved like a person, treated like a piece of himself, shouldn't *be* here. She grabs it and pulls it close, the fabric bunching in her hands. It feels familiar. It feels like home, dusty and ugly, but home.

It's early morning in Niki's bakery, sunlight streaming in through wide-open shuttered windows. Wilbur is behind her. He smells like parchment paper and fresh ink.

"Hey," Wilbur says, all soft and sweet. "Mind if I hang around here for a bit?"

Niki grunts, pushing herself up on her toes to get a better position to wrestle the dough into shape. "Shouldn't you be in a meeting?"

"They don't need me."

"So you're avoiding it."

"Maybe."

She sighs and wipes the sweat off of her forehead. "Fine, but you have to be useful. C'mere."

"Yessir," he says, walking up to the counter and cracking his knuckles. "Wilbur Soot, the coolest, most *adorable almost-president around at your service, my lady."*

"Uh huh. Sure."

"Yes. That's my official title, see. I'm required to say it."

Niki rolls her eyes but can't stop a stupid grin from creeping over her face. "Just knead the dough, will you?"

He nods and salutes her very seriously. "At your service, whenever you ask. Always."

"Always?"

She looks up at him. He looks down at her.

"Always."

Two days after that, the elections began and he never looked the same again. He chose Tommy to be his Vice President, she helped Fundy, and Wilbur was chased out of Manburg and didn't even bother to look back at her.

He's gone, the universe whispers, and Niki laughs bitterly at the thought. Of course he's gone. Why wouldn't he be? Wilbur builds, it doesn't look like it did in his head, and he leaves her to pick up the pieces.

"Fine," she says to no one, "you win. I won't chase you. I'll let you go and build a new country without me, okay? I'll let you!"

The nothing doesn't answer her. The waterfall gurgles, her heart beats, her breath blows, and the ghost of her nation hovers above it all, silent and almost real.

Niki stands, the coat gripped in one hand. She looks around the button room one more time, exhales, and puts it on.

It'll be different this time, she lies to herself, marching out into the morning, *we'll be different. I promise.*

The ghost and the nothing try not to weep when she seals the cave behind her.

To rise after the fall

By Willowsandwonders

Niki's been underground for…a while, when out of nowhere comes the urge to bake something again. A lot of things have been passing in and out of her head recently. History has shown that it's better for everyone if she ignores any silly plan or idea that comes to mind. Trying to run in the election, fighting for L'Manberg, being a good person, being a *bad* person—none of it ended well. At least the bread idea is slightly less likely to end in one of her friends killing themselves in front of her.

After all, baking bread is easy. It's a simple process that isn't likely to send shockwaves out into the world. At its most basic, it's just flour, water, salt, and yeast. Making *good* bread is its own story, but that's also something she has plenty of experience with.

It used to be a part of her morning routine. Every day she'd wake up early and head to her bakery, sword held loosely by her side in case any mobs strayed too close. Then she'd grab the cold brew coffee she left to steep overnight and down it while she started preparing her dough. By the time the sun was rising and the rest of L'Manberg was starting to wake up, she already had warm bread on the counter waiting for them.

It wasn't all perfect. On stormy mornings, L'Manberg's endearingly scuffed paths and roads got a lot less cute—in the dim light she might find herself slipping into an unpatched creeper hole and sinking up to her knees in mud. As if getting soaked in the rain wasn't bad enough on its own. Some days the only way she could drag herself out of bed was with the temptation of her coffee waiting for her at the bakery, or remembering that she promised Jack she'd make him some more zucchini bread.

Politics didn't help either. Underneath Schlatt's presidency, she was taxed so heavily that she barely had the funds to buy more ingredients, let alone to break even. Then came the war, where her skills were better spent making potions.

But now that routine is gone, blown to smithereens along with the rest of her life. Even the idea of a morning routine is lost to her now. Her entire base is underground, and there's rarely a good reason to leave it. Maybe if she was handier with redstone she could fashion herself a clock. Or

even do something fancy with some daylight sensors, like Puffy once suggested. But Niki doesn't see the point in doing anything like that.

She hasn't seen the point in doing most things, recently.

And yet, standing here in the dingy gloom of her underground city, there's one thought that she can't get out of her head:

I should bake some bread again.

It's not like she *needs* bread for anything. A few respawns here and there do the job more quickly than cooking ever could. Besides, food doesn't interest her anymore. Just the thought of biting into something makes her stomach feel tight and over-full.

And still the impulsive, unwanted thought remains—*I really should bake some bread.*

***

She'll take it slow, break it up into steps. There's no need for her to make anything fancy—no one's going to be eating it, anyway. So maybe just a simple sourdough, or something. It's just a little thing to kill time with.

The first thing she needs to do is gather ingredients. She's sure that rodents and rot have done away with most of the scraps she still had in her pantry. But the salt was sealed up, or in its little shaker anyway, and doesn't salt keep for pretty much forever anyway? So that should be fine at least. There's even a few packets of instant yeast buried in a chest underneath some loose bits of cobble. Must be leftovers from her emergency "forgot to let the dough rise overnight" stash from the bakery. And she has a water source in her base, too. So that's already everything but the flour taken care of.

Bread baking really *is* easy. It's pretty embarrassing that she let it fall to the wayside for so long.

It feels like a long-dormant part of her mind is starting to wake back up. Already, ingredient ratios and rising times and temperatures are running through Niki's head. It's

weird to be thinking about this stuff again but…not bad. Not bad at all.

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It doesn't surprise her to find her tiny wheat field in a wilted and rotten mess. Niki certainly hasn't been watering it, and half the redstone lamps set up to give them light have run out of power and died. Eventually this'll need to be replanted, but even the thought of that chore is a bit bigger than she can handle right now. She'll just go buy some flour. That shouldn't be difficult at all.

Shouldn't being the key word. As soon as Niki starts thinking about going outside, she becomes uncomfortably aware of her body. Her clothes are stained with sweat and ash and they hang awkwardly off her frame. Her hair is limp and greasy. It keeps falling into her eyes, where she can see the unevenness of the pink dye. Her skin is ghostly pale, her nails bitten down to the quicks. She can't be sure if she's imagining the smell of smoke underneath the dried sweat, but if it's real, then it's been longer since she last bathed than she thought.

She looks like shit, to put it bluntly. But the bread is hardly going to hold up a mirror and rate how she looks out of ten, now is it? She'll just have to keep her distance if she passes anyone. Right now, even one snide comment would probably be enough to send her rushing back underground. It'll be fine, though, she's sure. After…everything, there probably aren't too many people that would want to approach Niki at all.

She still makes an effort to be a tiny bit more presentable, though, just for the sake of it. (And definitely not at all to stall returning to the surface.) She finds a clean set of socks and underwear (and even a spare shirt!) and changes into those. Her pants and cloak stay as they are, but they're darker colored, which'll hopefully help disguise the stains.

Her hair is pretty much a lost cause. She can't tell if the pink dye is already fading or if it's dull from dust and oil. Combing out all the tangles one by one would take too long to be worth it.

There's only one thing for it. There's a cauldron down here, filled almost to the brim with water. Before she can

second guess herself, she pinches her nose shut and dunks her head in.

Cold cold cold miserable, but she forces her head under as she counts to ten. Only then does she allow herself to surface.

Niki shakes her wet hair out like a dog. Unsure where she would find a brush, or if she even has one down here, she just gives her hair a few rough rake-throughs with her fingers. Then she pulls her hair back into a ponytail and does her best to forget about it.

She spares one last glance down at the cauldron. Was that floating crust of bits of cobweb and dust always in the cauldron? Gods, she's disgusting.

Hopefully she doesn't run into anyone on the way to HBomb's.

***

Going outside again is strange. She'd expected to be hypervigilant, glancing over her shoulder every other step. But it's daytime when she steps out and everything is overbright in the harsh sun. No matter how hard she squints, everything looks alien and oversaturated and unfamiliar.

It's only muscle memory that navigates her to HBomb's house. The savanna and the orange wood from its trees are impossibly even *brighter* than her walk here. Niki sneaks around his base like some sort of criminal. She can't even pretend that she's not relieved he's nowhere to be seen.

With a lot of squinting against the light, and even more luck, she finds one of his storage sheds with a millstone inside of it. Inside of the chests, there's unprocessed wheat, but by the millstone there's a giant barrel stuffed almost to the brim with finely milled flour. Thank all the gods she doesn't have to mill this wheat herself.

Way too late, she realizes she didn't bring anything to pay him back with. Or anything to carry the flour in. Shit.

The paying part is easy—now that she thinks about it, she's probably already a wanted criminal. Stealing some

flour is nothing compared to burning down a national monument—and she'll pay H back anyway, once she finds some diamonds. He might not even notice it's gone in the first place.

The transport is a bigger problem with an even dumber solution. Before she can think too hard about it, she grabs a few fistfuls of flour with her bare hands and shoves them into her pockets. It's a weird thing to do, and probably gross, but it makes the flour transportable. So it's fine.

This had better be the best fucking loaf of bread she's ever tasted.

***

Niki takes the steps down into her city two at a time—not overly concerned with a fall down the stairs at this point, when even a respawn would bring her back into the gentle dark. Niki makes it down the stairs without incident and doesn't stop before making her way to the kitchen.

She needs to keep up momentum. An animal that's running will keep running, but if it stops it's dead. Or however that saying goes. So she'll prep the kitchen today, and wake up early tomorrow and bake. Maybe she can even bake it today and do everything in one go! It's not like she'd be breaking any rules.

Stupidly, oh so stupidly, she hadn't expected her kitchen to be that dirty. Maybe a little dusty, sure. But nothing that bad, surely—it's not like she's been doing any cooking that would dirty things up. And she doesn't have much food in her underground city, so less risk of mold or pests establishing themselves. Compared to that, a little bit of dust would be nothing.

But she was wrong. The kitchen looks *disgusting.* Only one of the redstone lamps flickers on when she nudges the lever. And the light is weak, the lamp muffled by a string of cobwebs drooping from the ceiling. Even the spiders that must have spun these webs haven't stuck around. Their webs are caked in the same dust as everything else.

In some places, Niki isn't even sure if it's all dust—is that ash on the floor? Soot peppering the countertops? It could

just be the poor lighting. Or there was a fire that she can't remember.

Maybe she's turned into something not quite human—a ghost that drops flakes of ash and soot wherever it drifts. She scratches at the back of her neck, goosebumps raising across her skin.

Her fingers come back clean. Just the normal flakes of dead skin and an errant drop of blood.

Of course. Only a coward could let herself believe that she generated soot and ash passively. Ghosts aren't to blame for anything. You can't hold them accountable. Striking a match is a conscious decision and she needs to own that. Whatever the mess on her counter is, all that matters is that it's her fault. She has to clean it up.

And it's easy to clean, just like it's easy to bake bread.

Niki turns on one heel and marches herself back down the stairs. Digging through her chests, she's rewarded by finding some old rags and half a bar of soap. It'll serve.

Then it's a quick trip to her waterhouse to collect a couple of buckets of water from where groundwater seeps from between the stones. Her arms are annoyingly weaker than they used to be. She can only manage to get one bucket of water up the stairs at a time. And once they're upstairs, Niki has to take a second to lean against the cool stone wall and catch her breath, the back of her throat tight and tasting metallic.

But she has work to do. The mess in the kitchen will stay there until she fixes it. Lingering and panting in the doorway, a wet rag in hand dripping a puddle onto the floor, can't be called cleaning. She used to be a *soldier.* If she can put on armor and charge directly into the range of enemy archers, then she can do something so mind-numbingly fucking *simple* as cleaning a kitchen. Right?

She feels half in a dream as her feet move forward, as her hand puts the cleaning rag on the nearest countertop with a dull wet *smack.* The water makes the coating of dust sluice together into a lumpy ridge. The soap bubbles pick up a gray-brown tinge.

Cleaning the kitchen takes forever and not long at all. Niki's only aware of it in passing fits and starts. Everything blurs into the grayness of the grime, the smell of ruin in the air.

Occasional sensations ground her. The gray soapy water that splashes and then soaks into her socks. The different parts of her that ache after she spends too long contorted in one position or the other—elbows, wrists, knees, lower back. The sound when she accidentally knocks the salt shaker off the counter and it shatters into useless bits of ceramic on the floor. Didn't Wilbur give her that one? Or maybe Fundy? Doesn't matter now—it goes in the garbage pile with all the other worn out rags and bits of refuse. It's *fine.*

The kitchen is nothing but as filthy as when she started in her eyes until the moment that she steps back and sees her work all put together. It's…kind of clean? There are some distinct patches that got less than thorough scrubbings than others. Some of the cobwebs were only partially knocked down, drifting from the ceiling like gauzy curtains. And she could really not be assed to troubleshoot and fix what's wrong with the lights. The one flickering survivor is casting a sickly weak glow over the space.

It looks better than before. That's something.

Better than before doesn't mean good, her own thoughts snap at her. *How can any of this be* good, *when you're the one that fucked everything up in the first place?* Her heart starts pounding in her chest. A terrible energy is building up in her chest. She needs to hit something. She needs to *kill* something, she needs to be—

There's a wet *crack* in the air as the bones in her left hand break from a desperate punch against the stone wall. Like embers being doused in water, all the feelings in her chest scatter into smoke. She's not angry anymore, not sad, not anything. All that's left are the facts. Niki can handle facts.

At least several fingers and maybe parts of her left hand are broken from hitting them against the wall. No point in trying to move them to test it—the low level burn and the early stages of swelling and a redness that'll turn to black bruising is plenty familiar. The stone doesn't even have the

decency to look affected by her outburst. Even one little crack in the wall would've been a nice acknowledgement.

And another fact: she has to bake bread in the morning. Broken bones are not known for healing overnight. Only quick and easy cure for it is a respawn.

She walks numbly towards the fence that lines the upper walkway of her city. At what point should she just tear these fences down? It's not like she lets them do their job.

By now it's routine, swinging her legs over the fence, balancing lightly on the couple inches of stone between her and empty air. This has been her cure-all for the last…few weeks? Months? Any headache, hunger pain, exhaustion, any *just so fucking tired of it all*—all of it can be cured by a quick helping hand from gravity. It doesn't even count as *dying*, it's just a respawn! Everyone experiences them. She's just surprised she didn't realize how convenient they were any sooner.

Why is she still standing up here? Usually she doesn't hesitate at the last step. Why would she, when letting go is the easiest part? But she notices something new today. From her vantage point up here, she can see the morbid constellation of dark stains on the floor below. Impact after impact that she never bothered to clean up.

You make me fucking sick, is the last thing to dart through her mind before she hits the ground.

***

Niki doesn't really sleep, but she does make *some* sort of an effort tonight. She kicks off her shoes and lies on top of her crumpled sheets. Idly, she considers making her bedding be her next daring cleaning project. It'd be easiest to take her laundry up to the surface and wash it in the river, especially since she'd need to go up there anyway to hang them up on the clothesline.

Would anyone in Kinoko notice the entrance to her city if she left her washing up for a few hours? Doubtful. They probably wouldn't even notice if she went prancing through the woods naked, belting out opera at the top of her lungs.

It's been a while since she's made a joke, even just in the privacy of her own head. She lets herself indulge in a little amused snort. Her blankets smell like wet earth and sweat. Niki closes her eyes and lets herself pretend that's the same as falling asleep.

***

At an arbitrary point that she decides is as good a "morning time" as anything, Niki opens her eyes. Bakers have to get an early start to the day. And there's a loaf of bread that needs her attention.

Her arms and back ache dully and her left hand still feels numb and tingly, even though a respawn should've fixed all of that. Stretching doesn't do much to help with the pain, but it's not so bad that she can't just ignore it.

The actual baking, the thing she'd been building herself up to all this time, feels like nothing. It's the same old process it's always been—flour and water kneaded together and dough already rising with the help of the instant dried yeast. How many times did she zone out during this morning routine in her bakery? Dozens of times? Hundreds? It used to be nice to be alone with her thoughts. Nowadays, she knows there won't be any friends wandering in to distract her with laughter and friendly conversation.

It's silent, buried underground. She hovers in that murky haze while the bread bakes.

When she snaps back into awareness, there's a hint of an almost-burning smell that tells her the bread is as done as it'll ever be. The whole room smells like baked bread. Pleasant, even if a bit tinged by charcoal. It's a smell she'd assumed would only live in her past.

After taking it out of the oven, the loaf of bread looms at her from the least dusty part of the countertop, staring her down without eyes. Visually alone, it is clearly not her finest work. The loaf is misshapen, crust clearly overdone and blackened in spots.

She steels herself to take a bite. Then to chew, and chew, and finally force herself to swallow the first thing she's baked in months.

There's no other way to put it. The bread is fucking disgusting.

Not even just because *all* food is kind of gross to her nowadays. No, this loaf couldn't have turned out worse if she'd *tried.* It's dense as a fucking brick—might have a future in construction work with its hard outer crust if it wasn't mushy and underbaked at the center. Its flavor profile is more or less flour with a side of *wet.* She forgot the fucking salt. Of course, a dish with only *four ingredients,* and she forgets one of them!

With one strained inhale between wheezing laughs, she feels something salty hit her tongue. Oh, those are tears streaming down her face. Well, there's that salt that she forgot! It's arrived a little bit late to try and save this bread, though.

She could make better bread than this, now that she's forced herself into motion again. Maybe she'll pay better attention if she uses a more complicated recipe? Pumpkin bread might be good.

Or maybe she could make *worse* bread than this, really hone in on her ability to ruin everything around herself. Pepper instead of salt, baking powder just for the hell of it—hell, maybe she could bake one tiny loaf and then bake another loaf *around it,* like a food poisoning twist on trapped chests. She could bring that over to wherever Jack is nowadays, try and trick him into thinking she's earnestly proud of it, watch his face and he tries to pretend it's not disgusting. That'd be fun.

The tear tracks are starting to dry on her face. She throws what's left of her terrible loaf of bread into the fire, watching in fascination as the horrible little lump twists and blackens before the doughy interior proves too much for the weak flame—smothering it entirely. It's like some horrible imitation of a funeral ceremony, the gods' least favorite monstrosity of bread refusing to die. And she can't help the next round of laughter. It's pretty damn funny.

The lights still aren't fixed in her kitchen, and the fire has been doused by her terrible creation. And yet somehow, the room feels brighter than it did earlier. For the first time in a long time, the thought of a life to live doesn't feel like a yoke around her neck. It feels like a chance.

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